

PERMANENCE AND CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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I would like to start by thanking the National Board of Universities and Colleges, and most specially my friend Björn Wittrock, for the privilege of bringing me from so far away, and for inviting me to give one of the plenary lectures of this conference. Since I accepted this invitation, I have been agonizing about what I could say that could be of interest to you. Almost ten years ago I was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, and I had to make a presentation on my research topic, which was at the time a study on the development of the scientific community in Brazil. At the end, a distinguished scholar in the audience asked me, very politely, why I thought that such a topic could be of any interest to an American audience. I never expected such a question, and was completely unable to provide him with a satisfactory answer.

As I prepared myself for this lecture I felt that I was facing the same question again, and I tried to answer it two opposite ways: one was digging as much as possible into my own experience, which resulted on a paper on the opportunities and crisis of higher education in Brazil. The other was to write a very general and tentative paper, which argues, in very broad terms, that there is something truly universal in higher education, whose understanding is enriched by changing social conditions and cultural and historical differentiation.

If I am right, the proper understanding of peculiar experiences of other regions and cultures should be of genuine interest to you all, since it could hopefully contribute to a better understanding of our shared subject matter; and in this sense my two opposite papers would come together¹. On the other hand, if we are dealing with radically different cultural and historical experiences, and if the similarities that exist between universities and higher education institutions here and elsewhere are only formal and nominal, you could certainly argue that there is no reason for you to learn about higher education in other societies, except by idle curiosity or an eventual feeling of guilt; and I could also argue that, in spite of the obvious achievements of the higher education institutions in Western Europe and United States, there is nothing one can really learn from you that could be useful and meaningful for other societies. Or is it just a one-way street, in which those in the South have plenty to learn from the North, but have nothing really valuable to give in return?

I believe, of course, that this is a two-way street, and the main reason for that is the universality of higher education, or, more specifically, of university institutions. In fact, all societies endowed with written language and codified knowledge have institutions which deal with the systematization and transmission of this knowledge, and very often also with its creation and expansion. Part of this universality is due to what the anthropologists would call a process of cultural diffusion, or inter-cultural borrowing. But, more

¹ Although heavily based on one particular experience, it does not seem to me that the questions raised here are peculiar to the Latin American countries. On the contrary, these countries seem only to amplify and eventually to anticipate processes and tensions that are present everywhere, as it became manifest with the half a century by which Latin American student mobilization anteceded Europe and the United States.

fundamentally, higher education institutions seem to fulfill important roles in any society, and, in spite of the wide differences that exist across time and space, to share some common traits.

Universities and churches: proximity and conflict

The first common trait of all university institutions is their close -and sometimes conflictive - relationship with established churches, or their contemporary equivalents. They are close because both claim to be the repository and the institutions, which regulate the access and validation of the highest forms of knowledge. For the same reasons, they clash.

When universities are nothing but teaching institutions of someone else's truth, they lose much of their sociological interest and their appeal as an object of academic enquiry. I would argue that this is valid both for the old Church-controlled universities and for the modern vocational institutions which are simply expected to train manpower to fulfill the technical needs of their societies, or to educate the students along the prevailing values and accepted behavior. In these cases, educational institutions are only to be analyzed - or condemned - from an operational point of view: how efficient they are, how they deliver the expected kinds of people in the appropriate numbers and adequate timing, and so on. Whether this "technical" view is appreciative, and the universities are seen as performing a useful role, or critical, when they are seen as an instrument of social dominance or control, is not very significant from this point of view.

Universities and higher education institutions have more than a technical interest, however, because they are seldom reduced to this secondary and instrumental role. I see a very clear parallel between the classic tensions between universities and churches and the contemporary tensions between those who look at higher education from a manpower point of view and those who see them as self-regulated academic institutions. The question, in both cases, is normative: what the universities should be - and they are the expression of a tension that is inherent wherever universities exist.

Differentiation

The movement towards differentiation and self-regulation, which follows from the original proximity between universities and churches, is therefore a central feature of all higher education systems, and the way this question is resolved or not is of paramount consequences. In most Western societies, a Kantian division of labor was the outcome: Universities would take care of empirical, value-free knowledge, while the Church and other religious and moral instances would take care of the realm of values and substantive truth. This division of labor explains much of the extraordinary progress achieved by Western universities since the 19th century. Unhindered by unquestionable dogmas and external controls, the traditional universities gradually opened their walls to new scientific and technological knowledge, and provided it with a fertile ground to develop and grow.

This arrangement was probably strengthened because almost nobody really believed in it. Rationalism, evolutionism and empiricism were powerful ideals in the building of modern universities, and their holders

disputed with established religions and churches the access and control of the highest forms of truth. Churches and religious movements never relinquished their desire to be present and influence the daily life of university institutions, and, as a last resort, created their own universities. And it was their belief in the superiority of their own knowledge that granted the lay university communities the drive to excel and prove their worthiness.

The contemporary scene is more complex, because there are so many more actors involved. Today, scientific, technological and social knowledge is largely produced in other kinds of institutions besides universities and churches, and the markets for their dissemination and decantation are also other - scientific societies, academic journals, technology markets, and patent offices. There is also geographical and institutional differentiation: knowledge can be produced in another country, or in another region or institutions within a country. This diversification of sources of knowledge puts a very definite threat in university institutions as they evolved from the middle ages: they are again pressed to limit themselves to their pedagogic and instrumental role, and to give up their claim for self-regulation and supremacy in the production and regulation of knowledge. How did these changes affect some of the main features of the classic universities, their claim for the monopoly of higher knowledge, their stress on meritocratic principles and their emphasis on hierarchy based on scholarship and competence?

Monopoly, meritocracy and hierarchy

In old days, Church-controlled educational institutions were the only way through which one could get access to codified knowledge and the corresponding social privileges and recognition. Benefits arising from monopolistic control go beyond the private rents usually associated with lack of competition; they also include social cohesion and control. It was doubtful that liberal, value-free education could play this role in modern societies, and Emile Durkheim was one among several modern thinkers who hoped that a new kind of civic and rationalist ideology would permeate modern societies through their educational institutions, and bring to them the elements of solidarity they needed to survive.

On hindsight, it appears that Durkheim's hopes turned reality. It is striking how little the universities in contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies have lost their hierarchical nature and claim for monopolistic control of higher learning. The state of California is a good example: higher education is now open and actually at the reach of almost anyone; higher education institutions, however, are quite strictly ordered by rank, with the University of California at the top and the community colleges at the bottom, and years of criticism against the socially regressive consequences of this hierarchy have not been able to affect it in any major way. There is a strong consensus about in whose hands the control of the higher forms of knowledge should remain. In California (as in Japan, another strongly hierarchical higher education system) monopoly is maintained by the meritocratic principle that places the blame of non-achievement on individuals, rather than on the social system that excludes them.

This result brings its own tensions, and other societies have come to different arrangements, or no workable arrangements at all. Businessmen, merchants and military people in all societies have traditionally resisted the intellectual authority and superiority of the "high brows" and "egg-heads" of the academic word, and developed their own alternative systems of values and ultimate truths, based on virtues such as personal strength, practical mindedness, common sense, personal abilities and cunning. Anti-intellectualism has made its inroads into the American education system, from the development of alternative, vocational and "practical" forms of education to challenges to the meritocratic principles built into much of the "affirmative action" policies of the last decades. This was not enough, however, to corrode the basic consensus supporting meritocratic hierarchy as one of its main features.

Probably only small, homogeneous and rich societies like Sweden can aim towards a successful combination of equality and meritocracy. In other societies, the insistence on this combination has led to compromise one of the two values. Latin American universities are all equal by law, and in many of them meritocracy is abolished or strongly curtailed by open admissions and lowering standards of evaluation and promotion. In many cases, the meritocratic principle is not really abolished, but simply transferred to other places and institutions - to private universities, in some instances, or, following the French model, to well-protected "grandes écoles". In extreme cases, as during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and in some contemporary fundamentalist societies, the whole set of values associated with codified knowledge and learning is abolished and replaced by other principles of a political or religious nature.

If we also consider that knowledge is constantly being produced and reproduced in modern societies outside its universities, and even outside the formal education sector, one could easily conclude that there is little left of the old claim for monopoly and exclusive control of higher knowledge in modern universities. However, these developments have seldom led to direct challenges to the role played by universities, and demands for university education have grown steadily in all countries, without clear signs of leveling off. In that sense, the monopoly enjoyed by universities on higher forms of learning and education is probably stronger now than it was in the past.

Access

The meritocratic principle has never meant that access was really open to everyone. Formal and informal restrictions have always existed in some degree - *numerus clausus*, religious, nationality and race requirements, fees, dowries, and patronage. Competitive advantages in meritocratic systems have always depended on previous formal and informal education, which is in turn a function of family socialization and previous educational investments. These "perverse", or regressive effects of education have been subject to detailed studies and demonstration in the last decades, and gained wide popularity. What has been less subject to analysis is how this new perception of education as just another instrument of social stratification came after a long period in which education was perceived precisely as its opposite, that is, an instrument of progress, democracy and social equity. Was this just a case of an illusion being debunked by careful empirical research?

Probably not. The expansion of modern education actually coincided with the expansion of social mobility almost everywhere. For some authors, it is as if education created new products and job opportunities. For them, education came to be seen as an investment like any other, actually better than most, given the economic returns it generated. This view of education as investment in "human capital" is overwhelmingly supported by evidence from industrial societies, but leads to strange results when transferred to societies like India, Africa or Latin America, where educational institutions developed very quickly and quite independently from a corresponding expansion of the industrial sector. In these societies individual economic returns to educational investment are still present, and are usually higher than in industrial societies. But access to education is much more regressive, and the aggregation of individual benefits does not add to much social improvement. For these societies the skeptical view, developed mostly in relation to modern industrial societies (by authors like Randall Collins, Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Boudon) seems to be more appropriate: what formal education provides is mostly status, credentials and opportunities for job monopolies and sinecures, with little or no new values accrued in the process.

There have been attempts to disentangle the question by distinguishing between education as "productive investments" (like engineering) and "consumption" (like literature or dance). Most products of education, however, can only be sold or utilized by others as services, and whether a given service (like administration by engineers, legal advice, specialized medical care, or playing good music) is considered a valuable thing or not is completely subjective and culturally bound. What is unquestionable, however, is that, for a long period in industrial societies, products of education were considered good and valuable, and generated benefits perceived as such by all involved. It is easy to imagine how this situation can be reversed: there could be too many people offering services and goods, their prices too high, their privileges too unjustified, their monopolistic practices too unfair and unrelated with the quality of the products they deliver. All this is subjective and culturally bound; their consequences, in terms of the way educational institutions and educated groups function in a given society, are all too real, and affect the capacity for self-regulation the universities usually have.

Self-regulation in mass education

Systems of mass higher education in modern societies cannot deal with the questions of self-regulation and the monopoly of knowledge in the same way the universities used to do only a few decades ago. Self-regulation seems to happen today in two divergent ways. The first is when the higher education institutions are well integrated with other institutions in society - when their professors are deemed competent, their intellectual products recognized as valuable, the graduates appreciated by their competence, and the costs of education not too high. Whether professors take part of their time to handle administrative chores, as in Europe, or whether a body of professional administrators develops, like in the United States, is of secondary importance from this perspective. The second way is when society is so segmented that the academic world seldom crosses the path of other social groups, and therefore they do not clash.

Self-regulation becomes an issue, however, when integration breaks down, or communications intensify. University autonomy regarding the broader environment has become a central issue in all contemporary societies. Simple reasons are cost and visibility. As more people enter the educational system, it becomes more expensive and dependent on external approval from taxpayers, legislators, ministries, planning authorities. They can all ask for better use of public resources, better-defined products, and more attention to goals set by other sectors of society.

Universities have traditionally coped with external pressures by co-optation of prestigious public figures, who are granted honorary degrees and invited to participate in oversight committees, or by the creation of buffer institutions (like the well-known University Grants Committee in England) and by relying on the expertise of its own people to counsel and advise decision-makers in matters they are led to realize they do not quite understand. These mechanisms are usually adequate to protect them in periods of stability and limited growth. In this process, not only the lay public and authorities learn more about universities, but also the universities themselves have an opportunity to gradually adjust to changing external demands.

External interference is potentially more dangerous when it goes beyond attempts to redirect educational institutions and becomes tantamount to external raids on their resources and capabilities. Anti-intellectual politicians can decide to cut educational funds and transfer them to more popular or supposedly more efficient goals; public education institutions can be perceived and used as just another source of employment and patronage in a spoils system; private companies can raid universities for their brains and hire out their laboratories according to short-term interests. These practices are difficult to prosper when the legitimacy of the educational institutions is well established; in other circumstances, however, the potential for conflict and destruction is quite high.

External pressures usually coincide with internal conflicts. The old Italian universities in the middle ages were supposedly controlled by students who paid the fees and had the professors completely at their mercy. If this was the original arrangement, it did not go unchallenged: professors were usually wiser and older than the students, and acted with the authority provided by the fathers of the Church or of the students themselves. Conflicts between faculty and students are as old as the universities, and can be considered part of more general patterns of inter-generational conflict.

To teach in a university can mean different things to different people - a part-time activity for a lawyer or a physician, a full-time involvement with scientific research for a scientist, a job for a lecturer. Each of these actors has different reference groups, and different views of the way the academic activity is to be pursued. In the Anglo-Saxon research university the teacher-researcher predominates, and sets the standards for the rest; in the traditional Latin universities, the dominant figure is the part-time liberal professional; in the large mass-education systems in most countries of today, what predominates is the full-time teacher, who is neither an established liberal professional nor an active research scientist. The coexistence of these three actors in the same institutional setting, and their conflicts, is a central feature of higher education systems

that have tried to graft some features of modern research universities into their traditional academic organizations.

Students are the second important element in the power struggle within academic institutions. Being in the receiving end, they feel they have an intuitive right to make their will prevail. The important question, however, is to know in which conditions this general feeling is translated into organized action and effective participation. Historical experience in many countries seem to suggest that student politicization and participation is at its highest when recruitment is made in the elite, but chances for prestigious employment after graduation tend to be limited. This combination of high expectations and frustration is likely to increase criticism of established pedagogic practices (very often quite justified) and can lead to efforts to achieve, through collective action, goals that are seemingly impossible to get through individual effort. The opposite situation is when job prospects for elite students are good, or when recruitment is done from lower social strata. In both cases there is a sense of personal achievement that can reduce the student's motivation to get involved with the broader environment in which he temporarily belongs. One can speculate about the possible effects of universalization of higher education in student political mobilization. In general, as more people are brought into educational institutions, one could expect that political mobilization would fall down, and this seems to have happened in widely different contexts such as the United States or Brazil since the late sixties. On the other hand, as higher education becomes an extension of the "youth culture" in societies which are going through painful processes of adjustment in their whole productive and employment system, conditions are set for a broad spectrum of inter-generational conflicts that use the university environment as battleground.

A final actor in the internal power strains of universities is the administrative personnel. The growing complexity of higher education institutions has led, in the United States, to the gradual development of a new profession of education administrators, with their own claims for recognition, power and authority. Even where this development did not occur, administrative employees have grown in numbers, get organized in unions and associations, and demand their share of power in their institutions.

Organizational and psychological theories cannot fully account, however, for the fact that sometimes these conflicts are much more intense than in others. Best explanations should take into account the way the educational system relates to the broader process of social change in a given society. The key question is whether the society is expanding or not its occupational opportunities, and whether the educational system is being used as a mobility channel, or, on the contrary, as an element of resistance against emerging groups. In Europe - and probably also in Japan - the expansion of higher education in the 19th and early 20th century provided space for emerging social groups who could not be easily absorbed by the industrial sector, but could engage themselves in a modernization, or "civilizational" process that put their energies to good use. There is a parallel between this modernization of educational institutions and what Barrington Moore has described for the modernization of agriculture in the development of modern societies. In other

societies not only agriculture did not open up, but their educational systems also remained closed, the consequence being, in both cases, revolutionary tensions.

The traditional politicization of Latin American universities, which spread to Europe and the United States in the late 1960's, is a good expression of this condition. Latin American societies have been traditionally very segmented, and their academic institutions up to the 19th century were probably adequate to provide their elites with the limited amounts of formal education they required. Tensions started to build up, however, when new social groups began to enter the academic system and realize that their institutions were not likely to expand and to take up significant new roles in their society.

In the 1910's and 20's most Latin American countries were swept by what became known as the "Reform Movement", which is supposed to have started in the city of Córdoba, Argentina, in 1918. As one reads the documents and proclamations associated with the movement, two features stand out. The first is the general condemnation of the quality of the Latin American universities of the time. "The universities", stated the Córdoba proclamation, "have been until now the hideout for the mediocre, the source of profits for the ignorant, the safe hospitalization for the invalid and - what is worse - the place where all kinds of tyranny and intellectual numbness found their teaching chairs. They became the true reflection of decadent societies committed to a continuous show of senile decadence". The second feature is the notion that only the students could change this situation. "The young is always in a trance of heroism. He is pure and altruistic. He did not have time to get contaminated. He is never wrong in the election of his teachers. One cannot conquer them by flattery or corruption. They have to be allowed to choose their own teachers and authorities, and will always make the right decisions. In the new university republic, from now on, only the true builders of souls and creators of truth, beauty and goodness will be able to teach".

They never went that far. The reform movement became known for its proposal of a "tri-partite" system in academic institutions, in which power would be equably shared by faculty, students and alumni, who were supposed to enroll in the universities for that purpose. It does not seem that the alumni ever got too involved. Conflicts between students and teachers, however, became entangled with broader political competition. Demands for self-government resulted, in some countries, into rights of extraterritoriality for the academic campi, and a set of explicit or tacit rules granting students and faculty freedom and privileges which common citizens could not dream of having. Such privileges could be interpreted as evidence of the special status enjoyed by universities in these societies. More likely, however, they express uneasy truces between antagonistic elite groups, which sometimes erupt in violent confrontations and even bloodletting.

Conclusions

Latin American universities seem to have carried to its extreme a specific type of self-regulation and autonomy, one which is essentially based on political strength, rather than on the authority based on its centrality on the knowledge production and transmission in their societies. There are many historical reasons for this outcome, which I would not try to elaborate here. In any case, this is not an isolated

phenomenon, and comparisons among the modernization of universities in Latin America, Japan, India, Africa, 19th century Russia and Western Europe should yield interesting conclusions. In no country were the pre-19th century universities able to remain unchanged. In all cases they had to open space for new generations and ideas, and in many cases to share internal power with new groups. In some cases, however, they transformed in such a way that they were able to renew their role as knowledge producing and teaching institutions, while in others they were taken by storm by other groups and were never able to adopt new functions besides those of status legitimation. How the educational institutions will develop in the next decades, what kind of autonomy they will hope for themselves, which kind of relationships they will establish with other knowledge-based institutions, in what measure they will remain the place for the development of intellectual and scientific frontier, as we have grown accustomed to think, or whether they would be reduced to the role of technical training, and what consequences these transformations will have for all societies - these, I believe, are questions that concern us all, and my justify my presence today together with all of you.